DAWN

OPINION

Overstayed welcome

IT is about time the three gentlemen took their leave. The five-year terms of the chief election commissioner and the two members of the Election Commission of Pakistan representing Sindh and Balochistan expired on Jan 26 last year, yet the trio continue to serve well beyond their constitutionally mandated terms. This indefinite extension in their tenures, secured through a controversial constitutional amendment, has served no tangible national good. It has, instead, become a symptom of the deep, institutional rot in Pakistani democracy. However, with the recent appointment of a new opposition leader in the National Assembly, who is not only a stalwart of Pakistani politics but could also prove a much more reasonable counterparty for this government, there is an opportunity to start the process afresh. It could prove a test case for a fresh start between the government and the opposition.

It is most unfortunate that no substantive progress has been made in filling these important constitutional posts in the year since a reshuffle became due. While the Constitution envisaged fresh appointments within 45 days of a vacancy arising, this government, perhaps anticipating difficulties dealing with a PTI loyalist as opposition leader, had introduced a provision in the 26th Amendment allowing incumbents to continue in office till their successors were appointed. This 'convenience' gradually became a constraint, keeping stakeholders complacent rather than pushing them to take decisive action. The extended delay this has caused has only undermined the ECP's legitimacy at a time when public trust in democratic institutions is already rock bottom. Pakistan's electoral integrity depends on the credibility and effectiveness of the ECP. It plays a central role not only in organising elections but also in safeguarding the democratic process itself.

The constitutional mechanism for appointing the CEC and ECP members requires meaningful consultations between the prime minister and the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly. With a new leader of the opposition formally notified, a procedural obstacle that had been delaying progress has been removed. There is, therefore, no justification for further procrastination. The government and opposition must restart the appointment process with urgency, transparency, and good faith. Political bickering, in the form of demands for parliamentary committees or providing widely divergent nomination lists, should be eschewed in favour of consensus on candidates whose integrity, impartiality and administrative competence are beyond reproach. The ECP must be reshaped on the basis of a broad political agreement and respect for constitutional procedure. To delay this further will only allow narratives of institutional decay and political manipulation to take deeper root.

Tirah displacement

AS the KP government and the centre squabble over who ordered the evacuation of civilians from Tirah in order to pave the way for a counterterrorism operation, local people are caught in no man's land in the midst of a harsh winter. Hundreds of locals have left their homes as the state prepares to go after a hornet's nest of terrorists believed to be active in the area. But neither the KP administration nor the centre is ready to take ownership for the evacuation and displacement. The federal information minister says neither the centre nor the military ordered the evacuation as the counterterrorism operation can be conducted without displacing the people from the area. The KP chief minister's aide on information, however, claims that the province was not taken on board where the launch of the operation is concerned. In the midst of all this bickering, the evacuation process has been halted due to inclement weather, with more rain and snow expected in the days ahead.

Instead of trading blame, the KP government and the centre should be cooperating to address the people's plight. Locals cannot be left to fend for themselves in such severe weather, especially when they have been uprooted from their native areas. The state must ensure they have access to warm shelter, adequate food and water, health facilities, etc, until they are able to return home. Those familiar with local dynamics say that the PTI-led KP government had indeed been taken on board regarding the evacuation and operation. However, due to the PTI founder's opposition to a military operation, the provincial administration finds itself in a bind on how to sell the issue to the party's cadres, and the general public. That state action is required in the area is evident. Sources say that militants belonging to IS-K, the Gul Bahadur group and Lashkar-i-Islam as well as Jamaatul Ahrar are all present in Tirah. These elements threaten all of Khyber district and Peshawar. Hence, an operation appears to be essential. But the state's action must be thorough, so that the terrorists are not able to re-establish themselves later. The tribal residents are justifiably exhausted in this endless cycle of violence and displacement. Therefore, the affected areas need to be permanently cleared of terrorists, while the local people must be cared for until their areas are declared safe.

HIV emergency

THE Pakistan Medical Association's "high level alert" over the alarming spike in HIV cases among Sindh's children is a warning that cannot be taken lightly. The body has called for stringent enforcement of infection control measures with crackdowns on quack clinics and illegal blood banks. As per the PMA, the provincial figure for registered HIV-positive children stands at 3,995. Over 100 fresh incidents have come to light in Karachi alone. This tragedy is not just a health emergency. It is a full-blown threat to our socioeconomic well-being. Families, wedged between poor income and lifelong treatment, end up in a debt whirlpool. As virus control remains absent despite several HIV eruptions, the association not only recalled the 2019 Ratodero horror, but raised justified concerns over the capability of the Sindh AIDS Control Programme.

Last October, the health minister was informed about over 600,000 sham doctors practising in Sindh with 40pc of them in Karachi. Other than routine orders, there was little effort to set accountability processes, databanks, and funding in motion. Additionally, repeated violations of global SOPs exacerbate the problem. As a result, Pakistan is likely to be saddled with an excluded generation of youth — a hefty burden on the country's battered economy. The reuse of syringes, razors, street salon equipment, and improper screening at blood banks must be tackled with criminal proceedings and penalties for those who fall foul of the law. The social stigma attached to the affliction must be countered with campaigns about its causes and impact in schools and colleges. The province's dire situation also requires a complete enforcement of the Sindh HIV and AIDS Control Treatment and Protection Act to prevent discrimination in schools and workplaces. None of these steps can be postponed. Health is a right that must figure on political agendas as a priority. Or HIV outbreaks will prove deadly for the country's economy.

BY ARIFA NOOR

Starring roles

For a young politician and a relatively unknown one, Afridi has a way with people.

THE young chief minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sohail Afridi, is attracting considerable attention, since he has been catapulted into this position. Much of it has been because of the criticism directed at him by those at the centre, in Islamabad and beyond. It turned him from an unknown face into an equal of sorts, thanks to the very people who targeted him. But, along with this, his own decisions to reach out to the people have also got him attention.

Since his ascension to the post of chief minister, he has travelled to Lahore and Karachi in a bid to mobilise people. And while he did not prove very successful in Lahore, in Karachi and Hyderabad he drew impressive crowds for someone whose name was barely known to people outside the party a few months ago. In Lahore, while the people were few, he still managed to create enough of a spectacle thanks to the antics of the government there. Before that, in Islamabad, he made surprise visits to markets to mingle with those out and about.

In some ways, his outreach to the people is striking in this environment in which few are making the effort to do politics. The parties in power are far too busy roaming in byzantine corridors, enjoying their plush surroundings, and few of those outside in the cold are relevant enough to matter. And while PTI continues to tread around, eternally confused, Afridi has ignored the noise around him and walked his own path.

For instance, soon after he became chief minister, he spent some time in Islamabad, meeting groups of journalists, from anchors to bureau chiefs to reporters. And while little of his interactions were reported on mainstream media, what he said dominated YouTube channels and casual conversations in the capital. His point of view and that of the KP government soon became familiar to hacks in Islamabad. It was quite an effective communication strategy.

This was then followed by the trips to other provincial capitals to kick-start what he and his colleagues call a 'street movement'.

In some ways, his approach also contrasts with the approach of his predecessor, a more traditional politician, who too addressed *jalsas* and rallies till the Nov 26 event in Islamabad. However, for Ali Amin Gandapur, the rallies never appeared to be more than a sideshow as, from all accounts, he thought Imran Khan's release would be a result of negotiations he was carrying out away from the limelight.

Afridi, on the other hand, is focusing on the people; it could be argued that he doesn't have the contacts to try and carry out negotiations. Be that as it may, it is still obvious that for a young politician and a relatively unknown one, he has a way with people. The ability to go out in the crowds and get them enthused is something that hasn't been practised by many outside of the few leaders right at the top. Other than party heads, most politicians tend to stick to their constituency and rarely look beyond.

But it also has to be said that Afridi can do this because of circumstances peculiar to the PTI.

The party's main leader, Imran Khan, is behind bars. Few of its senior politicians are still around and free; and beyond them, there is no clear hierarchy within the party. In addition, the family is also not in a position to lead the party publicly, because of Khan's own assertions that his relatives will not get involved in the PTI, even if they are now always followed. This means the chief minister of KP (the only province where the party is in power) becomes a first among equals. Gandapur also enjoyed this legitimacy and so does Afridi now.

And this gives him an edge. It allows him to lead interactions with the press and the public. Even though he is always surrounded by his young Turks while at a rally, or during an interaction in a room, he is the chief minister, and few forget this.

But, to repeat, all of this is possible because Khan is behind bars and incommunicado.

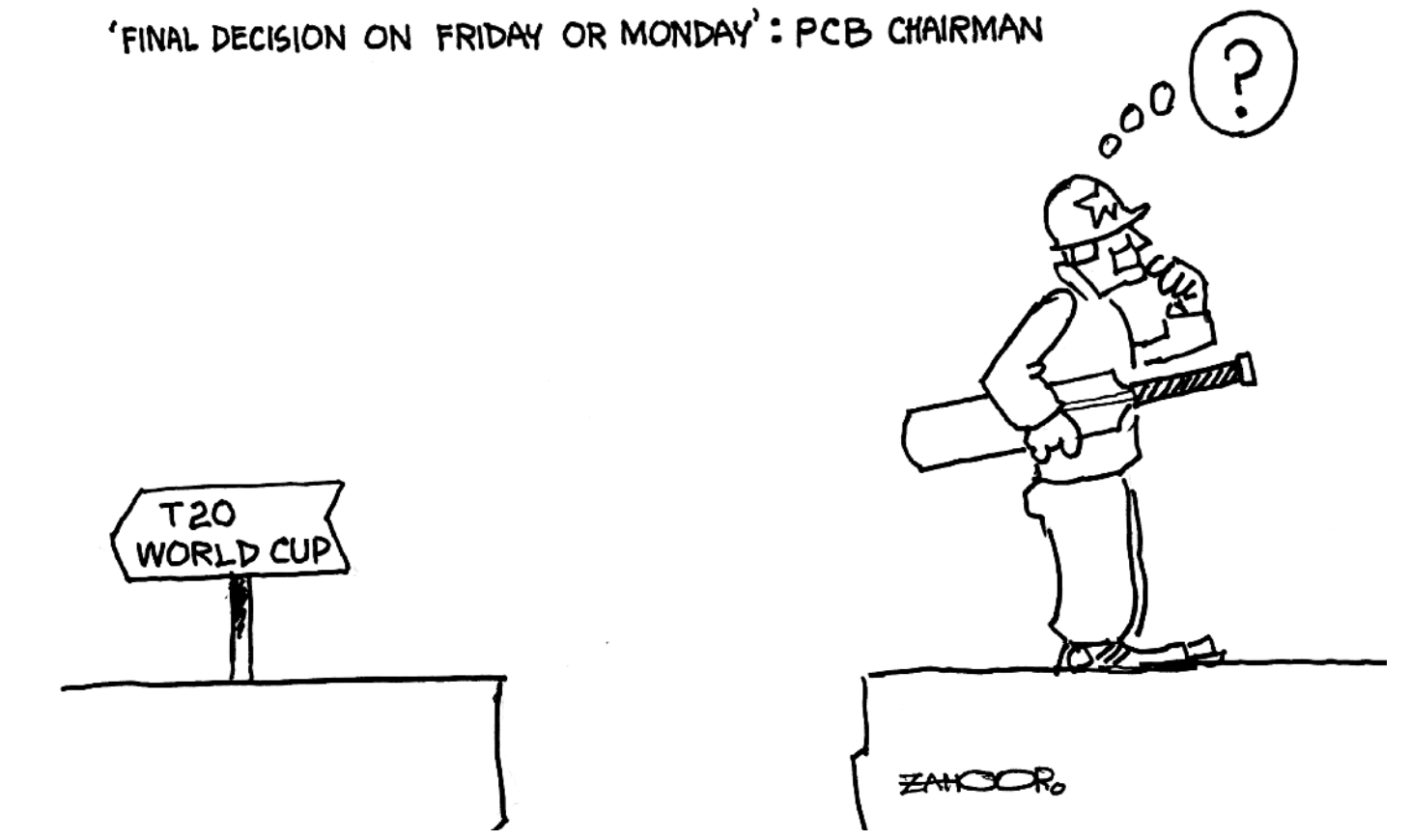
Consider the other parties, where no one other than the main family leadership has the space to dominate political space. When Nawaz Sharif was behind bars, it was his political heir and daughter who took to the streets, not Hamza Shehbaz, let alone others. And Shehbaz Sharif opted for the role that Gandapur tried to play; unlike the previous KP chief minister, Sharif proved to be successful, far more than anyone could have imagined.

Even now, if there is one person whose coverage on television overshadows the prime minister's, it is Maryam Nawaz in Punjab. This is less so because of her official position and more because of her standing as Nawaz Sharif's daughter.

Contrast this with the chief minister of Sindh, Murad Ali Shah, who has been around for much longer. But he rarely seeks the limelight or coverage, for he is aware that his position is safe as long as he stays in the shadows. He has to play second fiddle to the party leadership and he does. Recently, when the party held an event in Islamabad to highlight the governance record of the Sindh government, the entire presentation was given by Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari. The chief minister of the province simply spoke for a few minutes before giving way to BBZ.

Afridi, at the moment, doesn't have to play second fiddle. And he is also proving that he has the potential to reach out to the people and be effective in communicating with them. But will he have the space to continue taking such a prominent position and role when Khan is out of jail? For in the past, most leaders who led parties while the main leader was in trouble, didn't last for long, once the good times returned. Consider the fate of Javed Hashmi and Amin Fahim. Will Afridi end up like them? This will be the real test for Imran Khan and the PTI. ■

The writer is a journalist.



BY JAWED NAQVI

Be at the table, or on the menu

CANADIAN Prime Minister Mark Carney finished two significantly ground-breaking visits to Beijing and Davos last week and they hold a message for nations and leaders feeling the heat from President Donald Trump's insulting and arrogant behaviour with friend and foe alike. And while Carney maintained his country's relations with the US were multi-faceted and far-reaching, he was pleased that his rare talks with President Xi Jinping had set up guardrails for greater predictability in bilateral relations and to keep each other's interests in mind. He also clarified — perhaps to avoid needlessly poking Donald Trump in the eye — that there hadn't been a free trade agreement with Beijing even if thousands of electric cars from China would be plying Canadian roads in the coming days. And if this riles the US, so be it.

Why is it so difficult for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, representing a no less major power, to speak up like Carney? Holding the BRICS presidency for 2026, Modi is required to host a summit of its increasingly powerful and influential leaders in New Delhi around August. However, when Modi does speak, he usually speaks about a municipal election his party would win or has won, if he is not otherwise threatening to replace this or that opposition government in the coming state polls.

The last time one heard him speak on a foreign policy issue from Indian soil was the threat he made (unusually) in English in Bihar about avenging the death of innocent tourists in a terror attack in Kashmir in April last year. It resulted in Operation Sindoor against Pakistan, which apparently served no purpose other than to reveal India's shocking diplomatic isolation under Modi's watch. Going by the claims of Modi's own preferred media, he is a great speaker, a charismatic one, in fact. So why does the prime minister of India get tongue-tied facing Trump, whose presidency he canvassed for in 2020, which for likelier other reasons Trump lost.

In Davos, Carney spoke even more boldly about souring ties with the US. He told the ruling elites that the 80-year-old world order under US stewardship had ruptured and that there was a need to rearrange equations. The betterment of humanity and protecting its only known hospitable planet was paramount. "We knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false, that the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient, that trade rules were enforced asymmetrically, and we knew that international law applied with varied rigour, depending on the identity of the accused or the victim," Carney's message was blunt. "Let me be direct. We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition."

Carney's address was backed by the German chancellor and was followed by what seems like a Europe-Canadian pact to shun Donald Trump's self-promoted Board of Peace for Gaza. Its endorsement by leading Islamic states including Pakistan, Egypt and Turkiye makes it trickier to fathom the true intentions. Imagine the lot working with Benjamin Netanyahu who for his own reasons has enrolled himself aboard. It's not easy to see how Israel and Pakistan could be in a team that too in the name of alleviating the suffering of Palestinian people! India would have plunged headlong for the plan, but the unstated fear of being seen in the company of Pakistan has perhaps put it in a spot.

> Why does the prime minister of India get tongue-tied facing Donald Trump?

Trump's plan, in any case, is widely seen as a half-baked idea that postures to tend to the humanitarian pleas of the victims of Israeli genocide. It's also hampered by an even greater worry that Trump may be seeing the body as a substitute for the UN itself.

It's in this context that Carney's call for a new game plan for the "middle powers" finds traction, a group to which India presumably belongs as the world's fourth largest economy. The call was to collectively negotiate the jostling of Big Powers, which impacts everyone, including the Global South. Thus, Carney not only came close to the BRICS ideal of multipolarity, he surpassed it in his zeal to locate a world without nerve-wracking uncertainties or any more inbuilt inequalities with the US.

What did Carney say that melds with the agenda of a multipolar world, which should make India and other BRICS nations take notice? Like them, he spoke of the threat to multilateral institutions, namely the WTO, the UN, COP, the very architecture of collective problem-solving. "When the rules no longer protect you, you must protect yourself. But let's be clear-eyed about where this leads. A world of fortresses will be poorer, more fragile and less sustainable." In other words, individual deals with the bully are ill-advised.

"Hegemons cannot continually monetise their relationships. Allies will diversify to hedge against uncertainty. They'll buy insurance, increase options in order to rebuild sovereignty that was once grounded in rules but will increasingly be anchored in the ability to withstand pressure. This room knows this is classic risk management… . … Collective investments in resilience are cheaper than everyone building their own fortresses. Shared standards reduce fragmentations. Complementarities are positive sum." Carney could be reading from a Xi Jinping script for the coming BRICS summit.

Calling the middle powers in particular to act together, Carney cautioned: "If we're not at the table, we're on the menu." How could Donald Trump not pace himself in the frame? "China will eat you up," was his angry response. There are questions nevertheless that flow from a tartly pinpointed speech. Does Carney's new order propose to regard Palestine, Venezuela, Congo et al as equally violated by the old order? And what would be the fate of Nato, the Five Eyes and other assorted dubious relics of the US-led West? They can't logically remain intact, can they, in the event of a genuine rupture with the old order? ■

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